

The Holy Spirit in your life?

A sermon prepared by Revd Jo Coney for 23 May 2021 – Pentecost

Refs: Ezek 37 1-14; Acts 2: 1-21; John 15:26,27 and 16:4b -16

So – Pentecost! Today we finally come to the end of the Easter season. The story of God’s revelation through the physical presence of His son is complete. God has been present in the world in the physical Jesus – but now he is gone.

We have lived through the emotional and mind-blowing roller coaster through which we have experienced something of the discipline of Lent, the agony of Christ’s Passion and crucifixion in Holy Week, the emptiness of Holy Saturday, the joy and exultation of the resurrection on Easter day, then the period of Christ’s appearances ending with the Ascension.

And now we have had these last ten days – the days between Ascension and Pentecost - a time of waiting, of seeming absence

So now we finally come to the celebration of Pentecost –the coming of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples –and by extension to us too. The Holy Spirit, the gift of God’s permanent presence with us and all people, for all time and all places. No longer confined to one place, to one time and to just a very few people.

So we might picture the disciples, gathered together for the Jewish Festival of Weeks - 50 days after the Passover. A festival that was originally an agricultural festival but that was also one which commemorated the giving of the Law. But Luke (who of course is the author of Acts as well as his Gospel) gave it the Greek name of Pentecost.

Luke describes the coming of the Spirit in three ways: the sound of a mighty wind; the breath of God which gives life; the appearance of tongues of fire, the ‘voice of the Lord’ which in the words of a Psalmist ‘flashes forth flames’ and ‘as sparks that run through the stubble’. And finally the crowds behaving as if they were filled with new wine, as if they were drunk, and who were ‘speaking in strange tongues’ although scholars believe that it was probably just emotional speech rather than proficiency in foreign languages as within the crowd in all likelihood there would only have been folk who spoke Aramaic or Greek. But it does all make the clear point that the Gospel pronounced at Pentecost is universal and heard by representatives of the whole world- and for all time.

And then, finally, we hear Peter declaring that these men are **not** drunk - rather that the words of the prophet Joel are being fulfilled when he says “the Spirit has been poured out and the Day of the Lord has come”.

So what is this Holy Spirit, the coming of which we celebrate today? It has many names amongst which are: Ruach – the wind that brings life; Pneuma – Physical Breath; Soul – the inner self - the internal intention of the will – rather than anything tangible or physical.

So if we were to imagine the scene at that first Pentecost , and put ourselves in the disciples shoes – how might it feel? the shock and suddenness of it; the raw power of the rush of a violent wind; the bright and unbelievable tongues of fire leaping on their heads; an excitement and energy not frequently seen in our day – or in our churches!

So while the spirit is surely kind and joyful, its coming is by no means gentle but full of power, elemental, passionate and strong. No wonder when folk saw the disciples’ reactions they thought they were drunk! But they were evidently and, quite literally, set alight and utterly “fired up “ into the reality of the life that the spirit brings, the abundant life, the full life, the courageous life.

But we also remember that the Holy Spirit was not in fact a new, Christian phenomenon. Yes, clearly it came as a shock to the disciples but it is, in fact, there throughout the Old Testament too. In our Old Testament reading we had the story of the Valley of Dry Bones when the bones come rattling together, they acquire sinews and skin but they have no life in them until the spirit of God is breathed into them

and they become full of vibrant life. One of my favourite stories! A story that is a powerful metaphor for a dispirited people brought into full life again by the breath of God – by the Holy Spirit.

Just as the disciples too, at Pentecost, were dispirited, conscious of the absence of Christ since the Ascension and not knowing what might happen next, just waiting for something to happen, they knew not what. They were wrung out with grief, fearful of the future, and wishing to return to the past when the physical Jesus was still with them. But instead the wind and the fire came, out of the blue, suddenly and powerfully! And they are re-energised by the spirit, by the wind of God that blows over all creation. That gives Life. By the fire of God's energy, the unimaginable and uncontainable nature of God. By the unpredictable Spirit of God that cannot be contained. It is challenging as well as comforting. And if we imagine we can control it then we are hugely mistaken. There is nothing that holds the Spirit in! It cannot be contained or controlled!

If we look in John's Gospel, we are told that Pentecost happens when the Risen Christ 'breathes on his disciples and says "receive the Holy Spirit" receive new life. Life that is not just physical existence but a quality of life, life with purpose and passion and energy. A life that is eternal. Life that God sends – that is the spirit of truth from the Father. A truth which we also have received– and are to testify to the world.

So a person who accepts this life of the Spirit - a Spiritual person - is not one who is pious or religious – not someone who, like the Pharisees, makes a great show of being "Holy" and devout. But someone who is vital, totally alive, who is a whole and integrated personality - who is overflowing with life and love. People who create a Spiritual community that is not a 'churchy' community, but one that is full of fired-up people, going out into the world to infect those around us with the energy and love of God. People who can see the inwardness and truth of any situation. People who can see all things in God's light – from a 'God' point of view – in His love and his truth.

But the Spirit is also very challenging. While being our comforter, our life-giver, our energiser – our lover - is also very challenging. And there is no escape from it. It is all pervading – ever present – ever watch full – ever empowering.

I remember very clearly a sermon I heard from an eminent theologian some time ago who asked the question, "Do you really want the Holy Spirit in your Life? It's a question to which we probably instinctively answer "yes of course". But do we?

As this preacher said – he did not always want the Spirit in his life. it was just too demanding because it meant that every corner of his life was open to God – even the bits he himself couldn't bear to look at. He didn't always want the Spirit in his life because it meant that he was asking God to take total control of his life – wherever that might take him – whatever it might demand of him – whatever pain and suffering it might involve. It meant that he no longer had control of anything. And it meant that he was opening himself to live totally for others –others maybe who were not of his choosing, and it would almost certainly mean he would be asked to do things he didn't feel equipped to do.

So. I wonder how we might answer the same question. Do I, do you, really want the Holy Spirit in your lives? Food for thought – food for prayer – and a call for total honesty. **Amen**